

Flames on water: Mourning through a creative ritual in the Great Sandy Desert

Susan Begg

Abstract

I had arrived in Alice Springs on a trip when I found out that my brother had died. After some indecision, I decided to continue to travel with the group into the Western Desert of Australia. To honour my brother's wishes, I would give him the funeral he had wanted since childhood: a Viking funeral. My grief was relieved by art-making in which I created an effigy and a Viking boat. The narratives of the other travellers supported my belief that it had been a valuable art therapy experience worthy of further reflection and sharing.

Keywords

Location, ritual, effigy, Viking boat, connection, grief and loss

Introduction

February 2007 was a stressful time in my life; there were many pressures bearing down on me. My older brother, Johnnie, had been found to have a terminal illness, discovered as he was recovering from surgery. I had visited him in Perth and parted from him in great distress, sensing that I might never see him again. Around that time, course work for my Master of Art Therapy had been completed but I had begun working on my thesis.

Close friends, Buck and Beth, offered me the opportunity to travel for three weeks through Central Australia, from Apollo Bay to Broome via Alice Springs. For several months I tossed the idea around in my head. There were many reasons not to go: worrying about my dearly loved brother, leaving home when I felt vulnerable, having a holiday without my husband, and submitting my thesis. Encouragement to travel came from my brother who had always wanted to show me the desert country where he had worked and travelled for several decades. Besides, at the journey's end, I would be in Western Australia and could possibly see him once more in Perth.

Finally, in May 2007, I submitted a draft of my thesis which was near completion, and decided that I would travel. A break away would hopefully be refreshing and invigorating. Two close friends would be leading the trip and three other friends of theirs, whom I had not met, were coming too. We ranged in age from 56 to 80.

We had travelled for a week and were in Alice Springs when I called the hospital in Perth to speak to Johnnie. He had not spoken since admission but his younger son held the phone to his ear so that I could wish him well on his last journey. He uttered a faint "Bye".

That particular day passed in a numb blur, whilst the other travellers shopped, stocked, and prepared the vehicles for the two week journey to Broome; I had felt overwhelmed. That evening I heard from his family that Johnnie had died.

Eventually, after many phone calls and emails with family members in Perth and Melbourne, and discussion with my close friends, I decided to continue travelling. I would commemorate Johnnie with a symbolic Viking funeral (Escott-Inman, 1903; Lang, 1914) to be held at the same time as his funeral was